

The Law  
of Action and Reaction

By  
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## THE LAW OF ACTION AND REACTION

YOU will remember that, last Sunday, in speaking of reincarnation and the answers that it can give to many questions, I stated that there was one fact that ought to be understood before the answers would seem to be thoroughly satisfactory, and I called this fact the Law of Causation. I chose that term because it is one which is familiar to those who have read anything of Western literature and science, though it is not quite the best word to describe the fact in nature which it is intended to cover. Emerson saw the natural fact better when he said that with every action its results were bound up; there was no real difference, according to him, no dividing line, between that part of an activity which is above the surface, the action, and that part which is below the surface, which we often speak of, afterwards, as the consequence. The two things, the visible and the invisible, are really parts of one thing, and the Lord Buddha put it in a very striking way when He said that you could no more separate the action from its results than the sound of the drum from the drum. When the drum is beaten there is sound; when an action is committed there is an invisible something before, that is spoken of as the cause, the motive, for the action,

and there is an invisible something afterwards, which is spoken of as the consequence, the result. But looked at philosophically, these are part of the one activity. Because of that the philosophically-minded Hindū has always used the one word Karma, which means simply Action, to describe this definite relation, or rather identity, between the invisible and the visible parts of every activity. Now it is that which we are going to consider this afternoon.

There is no question as to the truth of this fact, called karma, so long as you remain entirely in the physical world. No one who has studied anything of science will deny the existence of the laws of nature. Those laws are not commands. They do not tell you: "Do this," or "Do that". They are simply statements of certain successions, or sequences, that have been observed to happen, so that, when one thing has happened, another definite thing invariably follows it. Such an observed invariable sequence is called a "Law of Nature," and these laws of nature, for science, are based on innumerable observations and experiments. A law of nature, then, is nothing more than a succession of happenings. This is fundamental for the understanding of what is called karma, and must be clearly understood. As I just said, there is no such thing in nature as "law" in the sense of "command". The laws of Kings, of Parliaments, of Legislative Chambers, are commands to do or to abstain from doing, and the penalty

connected with their breach is arbitrary ; there is no connection between the offence forbidden by the statute and the penalty imposed on the breach ; this is attached by the will of the law-giver, and there is no causal connection between the two. But with regard to a law of nature it is different ; it is not a command ; there is only a definite sequence, and the penalty following on its disregard is inevitable and natural. A natural law cannot be broken ; it can only be disregarded, and the results of the disregard are inevitable. Certain conditions are stated and, wherever these are present, some other definite condition will and must follow. That is all that we mean by a law of nature. If you sow rice, you will reap rice, not barley ; but nature does not say : " Sow rice," or " Sow barley ". She leaves you perfectly free to sow whichever you please, and the law of nature is seen in the definite relation between the sowing and the harvest. If you want rice, it is of no use to sow barley or thistles. That is karma.

You have it again, put in another form, in the Christian Scriptures, clearly and unmistakably stated : " Be not deceived ; God is not mocked ; whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." That is karma ; it is stated precisely, karma, neither more nor less. And when you come to think over these laws of nature on the physical plane, if you appreciate what is meant by them, and understand their bearing, you will have no difficulty in extending the idea of law to the mental

and moral worlds. To an ascertained sequence, acting in the mental and moral worlds, this word is constantly applied in Hindū, Buddhist and Theosophical books. All the worlds are connected, and in all, Law, which is karma, holds sway. It is an invariable sequence, and has nothing of the nature of a command; it leaves you free to choose, but points out that such and such will inevitably happen as the consequence of your choice, and whatever the condition you choose, you must accept with it the inevitable consequent condition. The statement of this on the physical world by a scientific man might make an ignorant person think that he is not a free agent, and can do nothing. If you have the bare statement of a natural law, it would be quite easy for an ignorant person to think: "Such and such a condition is laid down by nature, and therefore I cannot do so and so." Take what is called the law of gravitation—a special case of the general law of Attraction—that bodies tend to move towards the centre of the earth. An ignorant person might think that everything had to move in that way, and, sitting down at the foot of a staircase, might declare: "The law of gravitation forbids me to move away from the earth; therefore I cannot walk upstairs." How is it possible for you to move upwards? By putting against the force of nature that draws you towards the centre another force of nature by which you may raise yourself away from it—*i.e.*, muscular force. That is another fundamental idea which



you must get hold of. Although there is the tendency to go towards the earth, you can yet rise from it by the utilisation of another force equally natural. You do not break the law of gravitation. You feel its working in the exertion by which you lift yourself against gravity; that exertion vindicates the truth of the scientific proposition that you cannot break a law of nature. Coming downstairs, effort is not necessary; for in that the law helps you. Thus, as you go on studying, you find that a statement which at first seems paradoxical is true; because the laws are inviolable, therefore a man can move freely among them; but on one condition, and on one condition only—that he knows and understands them; otherwise he is a slave. Exactly in proportion to your knowledge are you free in the midst of these forces of nature. You can trust their working, you can calculate upon them. They work changelessly; therefore you can reckon upon them, can neutralise those which hinder you and utilise those which help you. Just because nature is full of forces acting in every possible way under changeless laws, *therefore* a man by knowledge can become the master of nature. That is another point clearly to realise on the physical plane.

You remember the famous statement of a great scientist, that I have often quoted and that is profoundly true: "Nature is conquered by obedience." You cannot fight against nature; she is too strong for man's puny powers; but you can make her do exactly what you will, if you understand and know

the laws within which her forces work. If you understand, you will be her master; and the only way in which science has become possible, the great truth which has made the magnificent and useful triumphs of science during the last century, is the fact that the world is a world of law. If it were not, its workings would be beyond calculation. We could never move with certainty. Accidents would be constantly happening, and we should never know what to expect. But because the laws do not change, they are calculable; because they do not change, they are comprehensible; therefore in a world of changeless law man, by reason, becomes a free agent, can compel the laws to his service, and make them do for him what he cannot do unassisted by himself. There lies the secret of the famous phrase of Emerson: "Hitch your waggon on to a star." The force symbolised by the star will move our waggon, no matter what may be its weight. Man is not commanded by nature, is not her slave; he is in the midst of discoverable and calculable laws and forces which, by knowing, he can rule and use. In the midst of this network of changelessness he is able to bring about the thing he desires, and to be sure that nature will never fail him nor swerve from her changeless road. When he fails, it is because he has not rightly made his appeal, because his knowledge is imperfect, and that imperfection has betrayed him.

Is it possible to transfer that certainty of law, that changeless inviolable security, to the realms of



mind and morals? Ancient religions say so; some modern religions say the same thing, but not quite so fully nor so clearly. If this be possible then is man indeed the Master of his Destiny, for he can then work in those worlds which shape the future, and make himself what he wills to be. But for this, as in physical science, detailed study is necessary, and the knowledge of the methods whereby laws are applied to bring about the desired results.

There are three subsidiary laws under the general law of action: (1) That thought is the power that builds up character; as you think, you will be. (2) That the force which we call desire or will (two forms of the same force) draws together you and the thing you desire, and that you are bound to go to the place where that thing can be found, and that desire can be gratified. (3) That the effect of your conduct upon others, causing to them happiness or misery, brings you happiness or misery in return.

Last week I reminded you of the scientific fact that Action and Reaction are equal and opposite. If a man understands these three laws, and knows how to apply them, he becomes master of his own future, maker of his own destiny. Instead of being helpless, as he would be under the hypothesis of special creation, or under the hypothesis of mental and moral heredity from his ancestors, he becomes no longer helpless, but the master of himself and his future, able to shape it in exact proportion to his knowledge and his will. I want now to show you how these laws work out, for without the

knowledge of these laws and of the method of their application, the mere general statement, however rational, would hardly be as satisfactory as I hope to make it.

(1) **THOUGHT BUILDS CHARACTER**: You may test that statement either by the authority of the past, which speaks very strongly upon this in the world's great Scriptures; or by your own experience—and this is in many ways better, because your own experience remains with you as yours, and cannot be shaken. The authority on this is very clear. In the *Chhândogyopanishat* it is said in so many words: "Man is created by thought; what a man thinks upon, that he becomes." The "wise King of Israel" said just the same: "As a man thinks, so he is." A similar idea is found in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*: "A man consists of his faith; as his faith is, so is he." Professor Bain, five thousand years later, you may remember, also gave conduct as the test of belief. I might quote many other sentences, and show you how entirely on this point the Scriptures of the world are in unison. We find it everywhere. Now if that is really a law of nature, it is subject to, is capable of, verification. Every statement of a law in nature—if the statement be true—can be verified by individual experiments; and so with this. If you want to know with absolute certainty that thought makes character, try.

And the way of trying is very simple, and proves the law to be true in a very short time. I say

that, because modern people are always in a hurry. But remember that no first-hand knowledge can be gained without patience and effort. Suppose you want to find out whether by thought you can add or take anything from your character—selfishness, or any other weakness; let us take as an example that you are irritable; this is not a crime, but a very common and ordinary weakness. You recognise that you are very easily made irritable. Having recognised it, never think of it again; because if thoughts build character, thinking about a weakness will put more life into it and make it grow; thought on your irritability would make you more irritable, and strengthen this undesirable characteristic. Instead of thinking about irritability, you will think about the opposite quality—patience. Think about patience for some five minutes every morning; not once, and then forgetting it for three or four days, and then doing it again. Irregularity undoes what you have done, and you will be only marking time as a soldier does, when he wants to keep the step but not move from his ground. You must do it regularly, for this is a scientific experiment. Every morning, then, you will think for five minutes about patience. Think in any way you like; vary the thinking; for it does not matter much what you think, provided you think about it; one very good way is to imagine yourself perfect in patience, a perfect model of the virtue you are trying to develop. Then think of the most aggravating people you know, and whom you often meet, and imagine them

provoking you as they do whenever you come across them. Image them as aggravating you to the uttermost, and image yourself as absolutely patient and unmoved under all their provocation. There must not be, in your thought, the least giving way to irritability. Whatever you think of their doing in the way of provocation you must be patient in this mental picture. Repeat that, with whatever variations you like, every morning for a week. Then you will find that the thought of patience comes up in your mind without being summoned in the course of the day. That is the first sign that your morning thought is working. You have made in your mind the tendency to think patience. At first it will come up after a little outburst of irritability; the morning thought asserts itself and you think: "O! I ought to have been patient." Go on still, until *with* the provocation comes the thought of patience, and there is an effort to be patient. Go on still, until the thought of patience comes *before* provocation, and the provocation glances off from the mental habit of patience. Still go on, until you will find at the end of a few months (the time will depend upon the force of your thoughts) that you have established patience as a part of your character, and you no longer feel the least irritability under the small provocations of life. I know that this is true, because I have done it. I was naturally irritable, but am now a very patient person. Try it for yourselves, and when you have proved the law you will have a feeling of certainty, you will *know*



that it is true that thought makes character. In that way we can go on, eliminating weakness after weakness, until each is replaced by the corresponding strength. You can definitely build up character, build it as certainly as a mason can build up, brick by brick, a wall. There shows itself the certainty of natural law, as sure in the mental as in the physical world; as you think, you will be. And if you will try that simple experiment and, remembering the importance of the question, be willing to sacrifice to it five minutes a day for a few months, you will find that you have that power; then, as far as character is concerned, you have become the master who knows how to make it, and your success is only a matter of time and of resolute effort. Is not this enormously better than going on all your life sighing: "Oh! I wish I were good!" and yet going on every day doing the same stupid wrong things? There is no other sure way. The power of thought is the power of creation. God made the worlds by His divine thought. We build our own little worlds by our human thought. There is no other creative power in the universe, and if men knew and used that power, their evolution would be much more rapid than it is.

(2) Next comes desire. **DESIRE DRAWS TOGETHER THE DESIRER AND THE DESIRED.** This may not at first strike you as so palpably true as the preceding. Yet is desire, Will, the one motive power in the universe. You see it as attraction everywhere. You find it present in chemical



affinities and repulsions ; it is playing in the magnet which attracts the soft iron ; in every force of cohesion and disintegration, attraction and repulsion, the double-faced power in nature, it is the one motive power. So long as it is drawn out from you by outer objects, we call it desire. You desire to possess this, that or the other. As long as you are attracted or repelled by these outside things, you are in that butterfly stage of consciousness of which I spoke, moving towards, grasping at, one object after another, inconstant, errant. But when, instead of being swayed by desire for outside objects, the same power is directed from within, not by outside objects but by accumulated experiences weighed by reason, then we call it Will. The difference between a weak and a strong character is that the one is moved by outside objects at the moment, and so cannot be depended on, and the other by inside experience, which decides his course among attractive and unattractive objects and may be relied on. There is the tendency in us, desire, to move towards an attractive thing, or to call it to you, just as there is attraction between a magnet and a piece of soft iron. It is the same power. The reason for that attraction is that there is one life in all, and the lives separated by their different forms are ever trying to rejoin ; all things tend to move together, or to push one another away, whether they be animate or inanimate, to use the ordinary words. Everything you desire to possess is drawn towards you by that desire. You see it even in the limit of

one short life. When a man sets his desire on an object, it tends to come within his grasp. If a person has a strong desire to visit a country, the probabilities are that, before he passes away, an opportunity will present itself and he will find himself there. And when you come to the wider sweep of many lives, then indeed you realise the tremendous power of desire—the desire which carries a man to the place where it can be satisfied, which draws him back to the spot that he may grasp the thing after which he has longed. Desire thus makes our opportunities. The desire draws the object towards us, and carries us to the place where the object can be attained. That is the second of the three subsidiary laws.

And this brings with it a warning. *Be careful what you desire.* You may take an illustration from the commonest of all desires—the desire for money. See a man who piles up an immense fortune; after he possesses it, he often does not know what to do with it, and it becomes a weariness to him. There is nothing more common than that. He has spent the greater part of his life in accumulating wealth, and at the end he is very often a disappointed and disheartened man. As long as the contrast between past poverty and present wealth lasts in his mind, the wealth is most enjoyable; but gradually he becomes habituated to his immense power of acquiring objects, and it palls upon him. In that struggle and that weariness is hidden the whole secret of evolution. Man

advances by desires, and the moment he grasps the object of desire it breaks into pieces, it crumbles, it no longer satisfies him. It is by these toys which so attract us that God induces His children to make the efforts that are necessary for the drawing out of the powers of Divinity within them. The prizes of life are useful, not for the enjoyment they yield when we have obtained them, but for the efforts that they stimulate while they are unattained and desired. But there is nothing worse for progress than for a man to lose desire, until his will to do the Will of God has taken the place of desire for individual possession. He falls into lethargy, becomes useless, will not exert himself. In everything there is inevitable disappointment, except in the realisation of the Self. It was put very strongly and beautifully by George Herbert :

When God at first made man.

Having a glass of blessing standing by,  
 "Let me," He said, "pour on him all I can,  
 Let the world's riches which expanded lie  
 Contract into a span."

Then strength first made its way,

Then beauty followed, wisdom, power, pleasure;  
 When almost all was spent, God made a stay,  
 Perceiving that alone, of all His treasure,  
 Rest in the bottom lay.

"For if I should," said He,

"Bestow this jewel also on my creature,  
 He will adore my gifts instead of Me,  
 And rest in nature, not the God of nature,  
 So both should losers be.

"Yes ! let him keep the rest,  
 But keep them with repining restlessness ;  
 Let him be rich and weary, that at least  
 If goodness move him not, then weariness  
 May toss him to my breast."<sup>1</sup>

Everything breaks except the Divine. Man, having tried all and found everything fail him, realises his own Divinity, and then and then only does he find rest and peace.

(3) AS YOU GIVE HAPPINESS OR MISERY TO OTHERS SO SHALL YOU REAP HAPPINESS OR MISERY FOR YOURSELF. According to the effect of our action upon others comes a similar reaction upon ourselves. This law explains a class of life's problems which I did not touch upon last Sunday. Sometimes you find a man wrapped in luxury who has not a good character. "Why should he be so richly endowed ? He is selfish and altogether undesirable." Virtue does not bring wealth ; its reward, as Tennyson sings, is "going on, and never to die." Suppose a man does some charitable action, gives a large amount of money—as in England or in America a man very often gives a park to a town, or over here gives money to build a hospital, not because he cares for the poor, but because he hopes to get a title by his gift, to be made in England a Baron or an Earl, or here a Rai or Khān Bahādur. What has he done really, and how would it work out ? He has given

<sup>1</sup> This is given from memory, and I am unable to verify, so I must apologise for probable blunders.



pleasure to a number of poor people; the park gives happiness to thousands of the poor; the hospital brings relief to thousands of suffering men and women and children. The harvest of this will be physical surroundings of a comfortable kind, wealth, luxury. He reaps as he sowed. As by sowing rice you reap rice, so by sowing pleasure you reap pleasure. But he has done it from a selfish motive, not for the sake of giving pleasure, but for a personal gain. How does that work out? In character. It works out in his next birth as a selfish character, and that means unhappiness, no matter what the outward comforts may be. It appears a paradox; outward comfort and luxury, and a character that none can admire; and yet the law has worked out. Nature has paid him physical pleasure for physical pleasure. She pays for the selfishness of the motive with the selfish character, which ensures personal unhappiness in the midst of all his luxury. Every law works on its own lines, with its own inevitable consequences; nothing is forgotten; nothing is omitted; nothing is forgiven; and all these methods by which karma is working are the explanations of the paradoxes of human life.

Realise those three laws and that you can make your future by applying them; you make character by thinking, you make opportunity for the gaining of objects by desiring, you make happiness physically, mentally, morally, by giving physical, mental and moral happiness to others.



Seeing these laws and understanding to some extent how to apply them, let us carry the study a little further and meet one or two of the difficulties that rise in the mind before the whole of this is understood. Naturally so many interlinking and interweaving desires, thoughts, and actions must make a very complicated web of life. How shall we understand how all the past works in the present, and how will these principles enable us to guide our conduct more wisely? A little knowledge of this law is often distinctly dangerous, because one of the results of knowing a little about it is the tendency to sit down and say: "Oh, it is my karma," just as an ignorant person might sit at the bottom of the stairs and say "I must move down towards the centre of the earth, and so I cannot go up." This little knowledge has caused karma to have a very paralysing effect upon many Indians. Instead of realising that, like all the laws of nature, it is not a compelling but an enabling force, they have sat down with the idea that they can do nothing because it would be "against karma". It is not the fault of the old writers; they have put the whole thing clearly enough. You remember how Yudhishtira went to Bhishma, the Master of Dharma, and asked him which was the greater, exertion or destiny, the present effort or the past results. Bhishma went into a long explanation and showed how karma was made up of past thoughts, actions and desires. Having shown the strands which made the rope of karma,

he wound up by saying: "Exertion is greater than destiny." How can that be true, when there are so many lives behind you? Exertion is greater than destiny, when there is this immense mass of causes from the past, and you have to meet them in the present? Let us see the reason for the statement. Consider the results of one day's activity. Look back in the evening, and see what your thoughts have been; they have been very mixed, some good, some bad, and some indifferent; the net result, the balance, is very little, either of good or bad. So with your desires; they have been very mixed, some noble and good, some poor and even base; the net outcome of this second force is not all in one direction. So with actions; some of our actions have made people happy, some of them were unkind; the net result is a balance almost between the two. Apply that to all days of all the past lives, and you will realise that there is not one great stream of karma of one sort which sweeps you on, but a very large number of small streams of karma, working in different directions, some neutralising one another; so that the net result is, as a rule, extremely small. A man may have thought so steadily and deliberately that he has made a part of his character undesirable; very well. Then by persistent and steady thinking in the opposite direction he will have to undo what he has done. But in the great majority of cases that happen to you, many streams are converging upon you and pressing you in different directions, and

you are now mingling with them present thoughts, desires, and activity. Hence, it is often the case that the force of the moment, the thought, the desire of the moment, is—to change the metaphor—just enough to balance the opposing weights, and turn the scale a little on the one side or the other. It is not as though, in the balance of karma, all the weights were in one scale and none in the other. As a matter of fact, they are often very evenly balanced and a finger's weight will often make one scale go down. That is why Bhishma tried to stimulate his hearers to exertion, saying: "Exertion is greater than destiny." You thought, desired and acted in the past, and now, out of all that mass of thoughts, desires and actions, some are with you and some are against you, and you, the present thinker, desirer and actor, may add the weight which makes one scale or the other touch the ground.

There are indeed cases where bad karma is so onesided that it is too strong for present exertion to overbear it. In such case, the knower of karma ought to strive against the evil to the very last ounce of his strength; for by this he diminishes the force of the past which is working in that evil direction, and thus weakens it for the future. Suppose man in the past has always desired things that are not his own, and has in this life a strong tendency to thieve. Suppose he gives way to that, when it comes upon him as an over-mastering temptation. Should he sit down and say: "I cannot

help it?" He should fight against it to the last moment of resistant power. Even though he may then fail, may fall again into crime, the force will be so much the weaker in the future for every effort which he has made. He may fail for the moment, but he will conquer to-morrow. The lesson that comes out of the knowledge of karma, is that whatever the temptation may be, we should fight against it until our last bit of strength is gone. Though men may judge you hardly for your final failure, knowing nothing of the preceding struggle, the law of karma has placed your endeavours to the credit side of your account.

Take another case. Let us think of a case wherein I have often heard karma misused, both in the East and in the West, by people who have begun to study it but have not understood its working. When another person is in difficulty or suffering, they say: "It is his karma: why should I help him?" There are all kinds of evils and sufferings around us, and it is true that they are the results of karma, but that is no reason why we should not labour to change them. Bad thoughts, desires and actions have created the sufferings; but that does not justify the present withholding of good thoughts, desires and actions which will change the sufferings into happiness. As yesterday created to-day, so are we to-day creating to-morrow. Even, selfishly, you should help when another suffers under his karma, for if you do not do your best to help him, then you are making a karma which will entail



absence of help in the hour of your own need. It is no answer to the cry of human pain to say; "You deserve it: you were wrong or foolish." Your duty is always to help. It is true that Divine Justice rules the world, and that none can suffer aught which he does not deserve; but the carrying out of a law of nature which inflicts suffering may be safely left by us, who are blind, in the Divine Hands which guide the world. Leave you the Rod of Justice to God who alone can wield it rightly, and be you the messengers of the Divine love and mercy to the sufferers. Know that if the law exacts suffering, nothing that you can do will prevent its working, but you may be the messengers chosen to carry the karmically due relief to the one who has paid his debt of pain. Will you refuse to be the agent of the law which brings the sufferer before you in order that you may relieve? If we make our own hardness, our own selfishness, our own indifference, take shelter under a law that is not understood, we only add a blasphemy against justice to the faults we have already accumulated, and in the hour of our own suffering there will be no hand outstretched to help. That will be the karma of leaving a brother unhelped. This mistake arises from not understanding, or from knowing a little bit of the law and not realising its workings. If anything is a man's karma, you cannot prevent it from coming to him. You may leave the law of karma to take care of itself. Nature does not want our help in defending her laws. Our duty is



action, work and rescue when possible ; we can only work within the law and through the law. And if karma neutralises our efforts, we can only submit. A man who knows nothing sometimes acts more effectively than a man who knows only a little. An Englishman, not knowing the law of karma, will fling himself against an obstacle and will often compel circumstances to give way before him ; while an Indian, who knows a little of the law, will sit down helplessly in front of similar circumstances and suffer under them. Neither of these conditions is good. It is not good not to know the law. It is not good to have only enough knowledge to paralyse. It is good to know the law and to use it. The whole of it is in the Shāstras for the Hindūs, but these are forgotten and so men blunder in their ways.

Suppose we apply this law of karma to one or two of the problems I turned aside from last week : the death of a son, but not now of a babe. The case was that a young man, seventeen or eighteen years of age, the only son of his parents—the boy suddenly died. He passed away and the parents came to me in terrible distress and said : “ Can you tell us what is this karma which leaves unhappy children with poor and helpless parents who care little for them and cannot provide for them, and takes away this our son, whom we love so dearly, and can put out in life, surrounded with every comfort ? ” Such questions are often asked, so I looked back into the past, and I found the

reason. They had been husband and wife in a previous birth, and had had three or four children of their own. A brother had died, leaving an orphan child with none to care for it. To leave a brother's child in the streets was impossible, so they took him in. But they were not at all kind to the boy. They made him a household drudge, fed him badly, treated him unkindly, and he died between the age of seventeen and eighteen, heart-broken, for he was an affectionate little fellow and had had no love given to him, but only harshness. He came back as their own son, with their whole hopes, as father and mother, centred upon that one child, with all their strong affection clinging to him; karma struck him down and took him away from them at the time when he had died in the previous life, and left their home desolate. Thus karma works. There is no escape. There is no such thing in nature as forgiveness, there is only conquest by knowledge, when you learn to balance one force against another, and neutralise past evil by present good.

Studying in this way the working of the law, you gradually become scientific in the view that you take of life. You do not complain, for you know that you are yourself the cause both of your sufferings and of your joys. The scientific man, if his experiment does not work out, blames himself, not nature. If he had arranged his apparatus and his materials according to the laws, it must have worked out, for nature never fails us; if the

experiment does not come off, he knows that the error lies with him and not with nature, and he searches for his mistake. That is the way in which a knowledge of karma works in our lives. We may not always know why a particular trouble has arisen, but we know that it cannot have come without a cause, and we at once concern ourselves with the best way of meeting the outcome of the past in order that out of the trouble of the present we may make good destiny for the future. In all the troubles of life a knowledge of karma is of the greatest help. No injustice, no partiality, anywhere; every man reaping the harvest of which he sowed the seed.

You may say that karma is a difficult philosophical problem, and that you cannot expect the masses to understand it. That is not found impossible in India. A peasant in the field will tell you in simple language what karma is. He understands that he made his present life, and that in his present he is making his future. An Indian and an Englishman were talking about karma. The Englishman said: "People cannot understand it. It is not for the common people." They were passing a house, where a lot of coolies, bricklayers, were working. The Indian said: "Ask one of those men why you are what you are, and he is where he is." "He won't understand." "Never mind: go and ask." He went up and asked the coolie: "Why am I rich and comfortable, and why are you here working in the hot sun?" "Because in the past you earned

what you have now, and in the past I earned mine. And if I do well, I shall be comfortable and happy in my next birth, and if you do badly now, you will be unhappy in yours." Karma influenced the man's life and work. He could not have talked about it as I have been talking to you to-day. He could not have argued or used philosophical terms. But he knew the main facts and lived by them; not the scientific statement of natural law, but the effect upon life of conduct in successive births. There is nothing that rules men's lives more practically than this law of karma. I have indeed pointed out that a little knowledge may paralyse. But the remedy for that is not to take away the little knowledge men have, but to increase the knowledge, and to show it as a stimulus to action, because it gives power.

There is one difficulty which may strike some of you as to desire. It does not seem to be quite under our control. How can we weigh our desires and choose those which we will allow ourselves to feel, and thus choose also the objects we shall possess and the lot which we shall enjoy? We want, we wish. How can we make ourselves like what we do not like, and dislike what we like? You cannot do anything directly to change desire by desire; you cannot cure it by desire. Yet you are not powerless. There are three parts in every activity: the desire, the thought and the act. Thought once more is your helper. If you find that you have desires which, working out, will ultimately



bring unsatisfactory results; if you find physical desires too strong—love of food, drink, bodily enjoyment of any kind—you cannot directly stop these, but you can change them by thought. Look into your life and see what desires you have which will “become wombs of pain”. Suppose it is gluttony, you are fond of dainty food; you eat too much. You must say to yourself—not at the moment of enjoyment—but when you are quiet and in a thoughtful mood: “What will be the result, if I give way to this? I shall get gradually too stout and helpless; I shall disorder my digestion; I shall become diseased. I will stop this desire, because it leads to suffering in the long run.” Then by that thought you begin to rein in your desire. You mentally picture the disastrous results of the vice, and thus breed a disgust for it. You deliberately make up your mind not to yield to a passing pleasure which brings long-continued pain as a result. By thought you struggle with and curb the desire. You can thus use thought to master desire and to change it. If you thus picture the painful results vividly and see how the vice will lead to wrong or suffering, then you can deliberately set your thought against it. Choose your wishes well and scientifically, with a view to their results. You may have a choice between spending a rupee upon a book or a dinner. You had better spend only two or three annas on the dinner, and the rest on a book, for the book lasts while the dinner is soon over and the pleasure



it gave is forgotten. Deliberate choice by thought—you being a reasoning creature—is your weapon against every desire that has in it pain as a result. It means, certainly, that your life will become thoughtful, that you can no longer live without reflection; but surely you who are men and women should not live as the brutes do, moved by passion and desire, thoughtless of the future. Your very name means the thinker, for you are men. The root from which comes "man," in European languages, is the Samskr̥t root *man*—"think". You are thinkers by your very name, by the place you are in through evolution, by the rung upon which you stand on the ladder of lives. For those who reason, for those who think, for those who deliberate, knowledge is absolutely necessary, for reason is futile unless there are data on which that reason can work, compare, weigh, and pronounce judgment. Therefore is it necessary you should study the law and, understanding it, act in accordance with it.

Such is the object with which I have been speaking to you this afternoon. I have put to you the fact of karma, with the law in its triple division, bearing on desire, thought and act. Instead of being discontented with what you are, make up your mind to be that which you want to be. Clear, strong thought is for the reasonable man and woman; and just as in the physical world, if you find things not as you would have them, just as in that you look for the causes, and having found

them change the causes, and with that the effects ; so also with your character, with your desires and your actions, realise the creative power of your thought, the directive power of your desires, and the fact that your happiness and misery depend upon your action upon others. Knowing the law by study, act upon the law as reasonable beings, create for yourselves a better destiny, a nobler future. Remember that as thought is a creative power and builds character, so is character the chief factor in your happiness, that upon which it most depends. Noble character, strong character, developed character, mean a great destiny in the future. Yours is the power of making it, for the choice—ah ! that is in your own hands.

New

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T. P. H.

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